

Praise for the Bluford Series:

“The Bluford Series is mind-blowing!”

— *Adam A.*

“These books are *deep*. They show readers who are going through difficult problems that they are not alone in the world. And they even help teach you how to deal with situations in a positive way.”

— *Vianny C.*

“I love all of the books in the Bluford Series. They are page-turners full of secrets, surprises, and lots of drama.”

— *Kayli A.*

“Each Bluford book starts out with a bang. And then, when you turn the page, it gets even better!”

— *Alex M.*

“The Bluford Series is amazing! They make you feel like you’re inside the story, like everything’s happening to you.”

— *Ricardo N.*

“These are life-changing stories that make you think long after you reach the last page.”

— *Eddie M.*

“I found it very easy to lose myself in these books. They kept my interest from beginning to end and were always realistic. The characters are vivid, and the endings left me in eager anticipation of the next book.”

— *Keziah J.*

“For the first time in high school, I read a book I liked. For real, the Bluford Series is *tight*.”

— *Jermaine B.*

“These are thrilling, suspenseful books filled with real-life scenarios that make them too good to put down.”

— *DeAndria B.*

“My school is just like Bluford High. The characters are just like people I know. These books are *real!*”

— *Jessica K.*

“I have never been so interested in books in my entire life. I’m surprised how much the Bluford Series catches my attention. Once I start reading, I can’t stop. I keep staying up into the midnight hours trying to finish.”

— *Andrew C.*

“The Bluford Series are the best books I have ever read. They are like TVs in my head.”

— *Yaovi C.*

“One of my friends told me how good the Bluford Series is. She was right. Once I started reading, I couldn’t stop, not even to sleep!”

— *Bibi R.*

“I love the Bluford books and the stories they tell. They’re so real and action-packed, I feel like I’m inside the pages, standing next to the characters!”

— *Michael D.*

Promises to Keep

Paul Langan

Series Editor: Paul Langan



TOWNSEND PRESS
www.townsendpress.com

Books in the Bluford Series

<i>Lost and Found</i>	<i>The Fallen</i>
<i>A Matter of Trust</i>	<i>Shattered</i>
<i>Secrets in the Shadows</i>	<i>Search for Safety</i>
<i>Someone to Love Me</i>	<i>No Way Out</i>
<i>The Bully</i>	<i>Schooled</i>
<i>The Gun</i>	<i>Breaking Point</i>
<i>Until We Meet Again</i>	<i>The Test</i>
<i>Blood Is Thicker</i>	<i>Pretty Ugly</i>
<i>Brothers in Arms</i>	<i>Promises to Keep</i>
<i>Summer of Secrets</i>	<i>Survivor</i>

Copyright © 2013 by Townsend Press, Inc.
Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover illustration © 2013 by Gerald Purnell

All rights reserved. Any **one** chapter of this book may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher. For permission to reproduce more than one chapter, send requests to:

Townsend Press, Inc.
439 Kelley Drive
West Berlin, NJ 08091
permissions@townsendpress.com

ISBN: 978-1-59194-303-7

Library of Congress Control Number:
2012953523

Chapter 1

“C’mon, wake up.”

Tyray Hobbs opened his eyes and glanced at his clock. It was 5:03 a.m. He had been asleep for only a few hours.

Was yesterday just a bad dream? he wondered.

“I said WAKE UP!” ordered Gil Hobbs, Tyray’s father. He was standing in the bedroom doorway, already dressed in jeans and work boots, the same ones he wore every day on the job as a construction foreman.

“What for? It’s early,” Tyray replied. “School ain’t startin’ for hours.”

“We ain’t goin’ to Bluford. You and me got something else to do first,” his father barked.

Tyray sat up and squinted at the

hallway light that shined into his room. After what happened last night, he didn't want to get up or think about anything.

"Where we goin'?"

"We gotta get that gun you left in the alley," Dad answered soberly. "We can't leave it where some kids might pick it up. It's probably got your fingerprints all over it, too," he grumbled. "Don't need no cops haulin' you away. One son is bad enough."

Tyray winced at his father's words. He knew Dad was talking about Warren, his older brother, who had been dragged out of their house by the police over a year ago. He was arrested for armed robbery. Since then, Dad had become a bitter, quick-tempered man who yelled more than anything. Tyray knew he had given his father many reasons to yell, especially last night.

"C'mon. *Move*," Dad ordered. "We gotta go."

Tyray stumbled to the bathroom and shut the door. He froze at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot. The cast that encased his left hand was stained with droplets of mud. A painful scab stretched just under his

hairline. He looked terrible. The events of last night flooded through his mind like scenes from a nightmare.

The cold heaviness of the gun in his hand.

The terror in Darrell Mercer's eyes as Tyray's finger slid over the trigger.

The final moment when, instead of at Darrell, he had pointed the gun at himself.

Tyray shuddered. He turned on the water and splashed his face, trying to drive away the memories. Fifteen years old and nearly six feet tall, Tyray had spent his days as a freshman at Bluford High School tormenting Darrell, a new kid from Philadelphia. He had robbed him of his lunch money, tripped him in gym class, tossed him in a trash can at a school dance, and sent him home in tears more than once. But then one day, during lunch period two weeks ago, Darrell stood up to him.

"*You ain't nothing but a bully*," he had said.

At first, Tyray didn't know what to do. None of the kids he had hassled since middle school ever challenged him. Broad and muscular for his age, Tyray had kept them too scared to do that, let alone snitch to a teacher.

But Darrell was different. He had joined Bluford's wrestling team and had gradually become more popular at school. And when he spoke up in front of everyone, he said something else, words that stung each time Tyray remembered them.

"No one in this school likes you. They're just scared of you. But you know what? I ain't afraid of you no more."

People whooped at the insult. Others rushed forward like hungry dogs that smelled blood.

"Fight, fight, fight!" some yelled. A crowd quickly formed. It seemed everyone in the cafeteria was eager to see what would happen next.

Tyray snapped. Every cell in his body was ready to destroy Darrell right there. He didn't care if he got suspended. Losing his reputation was far worse. But when he swung his fists at the smaller boy, it all went wrong.

Darrell was quick. He dodged Tyray's punches. Then, in a flash, he used a wrestling move, lifting Tyray up and slamming him down on the rock-hard cafeteria floor. When Tyray landed, his left wrist snapped like a tree branch. He screamed in pain

clutching his hand. Some in the crowd nodded and smirked at him. A few even laughed.

Principal Spencer gave Tyray a three-day suspension for fighting. Afterward he became a joke at school. People who used to join him in teasing Darrell now laughed at him. Others, including his old friend Rodney Banks, acted as if he didn't exist. That's when Tyray decided he needed a gun.

"C'mon, boy!" Dad yelled from out in the hallway. "We ain't got all day."

"I'll be out in a minute!" Tyray hollered, quickly washing himself and rushing to his room to throw on some jeans and a black hoodie.

Minutes later, Tyray sat in his father's noisy pickup, gazing out at Union Street. In the dreary gray dawn, the normally busy avenue looked deserted. Apartment windows were dark. Storefronts stood shuttered and empty. Some were hidden behind thick steel mesh that made them look like jails.

"This neighborhood's goin' downhill," his father mumbled as he drove.

Outside, the familiar buildings passed by in a dull blur. The Laundromat. Metro Cell Phones. Wilson's Pharmacy. Quick

Check-Cashing. The pawnshop with the ugly "Cash 4 Gold" sign. Further up the block, closer to Bluford, was Graham's store and then Phat Burger, the fast food joint where Tyray hung out many times after school, usually with money he stole from Darrell. It all seemed so long ago.

"Gonna be like 43rd Street around here soon. You'll see," Dad grumbled.

Tyray cringed. He knew all about 43rd Street. It was the first place he went to buy a gun. He had gone straight to Jupiter James, a Bluford dropout everyone knew was a drug dealer. Jupiter's older brother, Londell, would have been Tyray's first choice, but he was locked up last year for attempted murder.

The night Tyray went to pick up the weapon, he got jumped. Someone smashed his head with a stick and robbed him while he was down. Tyray was so desperate afterward that he stole money from Mom. He used it to buy a gun from Bones, a scary old thug who had been in the neighborhood for years. Bones sold him the weapon right behind Phat Burger.

Tyray's hand trembled slightly as he spotted the side street where he had met Bones. He buried it in his sleeve so Dad

wouldn't see. A minute later they arrived at the store where Darrell worked. Tyray's stomach sank.

"It's back there," he said, pointing to an alley that ran along the edge of the store parking lot. The asphalt was slick from rain that had fallen the night before. A few sections were cracked and sunken, making shallow puddles the size of graves.

Dad's jaws were clenched. A vein bulged just behind his temple as he wheeled the pickup around and pulled to a stop. He shoved the gear into park and yanked the keys from the ignition.

"Show me," he grunted.

Tyray felt an acid taste in his mouth as he led his father to the straggly shrubs where he had hidden the night before, waiting for Darrell.

"Here," he said, feeling as if he were about to vomit. "I was . . . we were here." He pointed to where he had knocked Darrell off his bike. A muddy gash marked where the bicycle tires had scraped the ground. Just hours earlier he had stood in the same spot, pointing a gun at Darrell's head. The moment flashed through his mind.

"Please don't kill me," Darrell had

cried, tears running down his face, his voice cracked and choked with fear. In the gloomy drizzle, Darrell had looked like a child, not a fifteen-year-old. *"Please!"* he had begged.

All Tyray had to do was pull the trigger, and Darrell Mercer would have been gone. Erased.

But Tyray couldn't do it.

He had never wanted to be a killer, but somehow things had gotten out of control. A near failure at school, Tyray had been almost friendless since Darrell humiliated him. He couldn't imagine going back to school with everyone hating him. He could see only one way out, one way to make it all go away. He raised the gun away from Darrell and pointed it at his own skull. His hand trembled in the quiet drizzle, and he braced for the blast he knew was coming.

BOOM!

But just before he had pulled the trigger, Darrell dove at him, knocking his hand away. The shot thundered harmlessly into the air. If Darrell had been a second slower, Tyray knew he never would have made it home.

His parents looked stunned when he crept in three hours late, covered in

mud, his eyes wet from rain and sweat and tears. Mr. Mitchell, his English teacher, was there. He had heard the rumors in school that Tyray had a gun, and he came to talk to his parents. Facing them, Tyray confessed his problems at Bluford and how he had bought a gun. But he never told them about putting the gun to his own head.

"I didn't do nothin' to Darrell," he explained. *"I knew it wasn't right, so I just threw the gun away. That's all that happened. I swear."*

Mr. Mitchell nodded grimly as Tyray spoke. Later, Tyray overheard the teacher suggest they see a family counselor. Dad shrugged off the idea.

"I respect what you're sayin', Mr. Mitchell, but we can handle our own problems. We don't need someone comin' in here tellin' us how to raise our son."

Tyray was relieved. He didn't want some stranger trying to figure out what he had almost done. But he could tell by his mother's eyes that she disagreed with Dad's decision, though she didn't say anything. It was always that way.

"Where is it?" Dad asked, breaking his thoughts. He was hunched over a thick clump of weeds looking for the

weapon. "Which way did you throw it?"

Tyray studied the ground and retraced his steps. He walked over to where he stood when Darrell shoved his arm. Nearby was a muddy puddle the size of a headstone. Tyray peered into the shallow black pool.

He could see the gun, its barrel barely peeking up from the murky water. It was pointed right at his feet.

"It's right here—"

"Don't touch it!" Dad snapped, darting in front of him. He reached into the puddle and pulled out the weapon. Its slick metal glistened weakly in the dim morning light.

"C'mon, let's go," Dad huffed, throwing it into a white plastic bag and rushing back to the truck as if he were afraid others might see them. Seconds later, they were heading home.

"I still can't believe what you did!" Dad barked. He gunned the accelerator and the old truck lurched forward.

Tyray said nothing. He kept his eyes locked on the streets outside his window. Anything to avoid his father's face.

"This ain't over yet, neither," Dad fumed. "What if his family presses charges?"

"Darrell wouldn't do that. He ain't no snitch. He never told anyone the whole time I was hassling him," Tyray admitted.

"Oh, so you got it all figured out now, is that what you're sayin'?" Dad asked, smacking the steering wheel as they pulled to a stop at an intersection. Across from them, a police car waited at a red light. Dad eyed it nervously. "You think his momma's gonna sit still when he tells her some boy from school put a gun to his head?"

Tyray rubbed his forehead. He hadn't thought of that. Would Darrell tell her what happened?

"Cops might come for you yet, and I won't be able to do nothin' about it," Dad said as the light turned green. They both watched in silence as the police car slowly passed. Tyray glanced in the rear-view mirror to see the car stop, turn around and begin following them.

Maybe I shoulda never come home, Tyray thought. Maybe I woulda been better off if Darrell were slower. Just a second or two.

The dark thoughts swirled in his mind as they returned to their small rancher. The police car trailed them the

entire way back. Finally, as they pulled into the driveway, it passed by.

Dad sighed, wiped his brow, and grabbed the plastic bag with the gun.

“So where’d you get this thing, anyway?”

Tyray shrugged. He wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Boy, I’m talkin’ to you! Look at me. Where’d you get this gun?” Dad repeated.

Tyray glanced up at his father. Deep creases lined his forehead, and a vein throbbled in his neck. His left hand still clutched the steering wheel.

“Don’t make me repeat myself again,” Dad warned.

Tyray didn’t know what to do. If he didn’t answer, Dad might hit him. He could see it in his eyes. It was as if his father had forgotten the promises he had made to Mr. Mitchell last night.

“*I’m gonna try and be more patient with him,*” he had said when he shook the teacher’s hand.

“Speak, boy!” Dad boomed, grabbing the collar of Tyray’s sweatshirt in his fist.

“*Bones,*” Tyray wanted to say. He pictured the skinny man with the voice that crackled like dry leaves and a cough that

sounded like death itself. “*I got it from some scary dude named Bones.*”

But Tyray couldn’t say the name. He was afraid that if word got out, Bones might come after him or his family. He had heard stories in the neighborhood and knew the man was dangerous. Bones even admitted to him that he had killed someone.

“Some dude on 43rd Street. I never seen him before,” Tyray lied. “I don’t even know his name. I just gave him the money and that was it.”

His father shoved him back against the passenger door as if Tyray’s words disgusted him.

“Don’t be lying to me, Tyray. Not after all this. If you’re protectin’ one of your friends—”

“I ain’t lyin’, Dad. I swear.” Tyray tried his best to sound convincing, but he could see his father wasn’t fooled. He had gone to 43rd Street to buy a gun from Londell James, but he ended up getting robbed by some kids instead. That’s when he turned to Bones.

“Boy, I don’t even want to look at you right now,” Dad fumed. He took his keys and the plastic bag and stormed toward the house.

"What's wrong?" Mom said, meeting Dad at the door.

"He's lying. Right now, after everything that happened, he's *still* lying. I don't care what Mr. Mitchell says," Dad growled, turning and pointing at him. "He don't know you like I do. Your butt is grounded. Y'hear me?"

Tyray shrugged. "*If I'da been faster, you wouldn't have to bother with me no more, Dad. Maybe then you'd be happy,*" he wanted to say, but his mouth felt glued shut. He couldn't speak.

"I don't even want to look at his lyin' face right now!" Dad yelled.

"Gil, please."

"What? He coulda killed a boy last night!" his father hollered, slamming his fist against the side of the house.

"But he *didn't*," Mom insisted, touching his shoulders. "He walked away. He knew better."

"Yeah, well how come he didn't know better when he stole your money? Or when he snuck out in the middle of the night and hid a gun in his mattress? Or when he was beatin' up that boy for months? Or when he lied to my face just now? Huh?" Dad barked, hurling questions like punches.

Mom stepped back, as if Dad's words hurt.

"I'll tell you why. 'Cause he's no good!" Dad yelled, shouldering past her into the house, carrying the plastic bag. "He's gonna throw his life away too, just like his brother."

"Gil, you know that's not true," Mom protested, but Dad was already inside.

Tyray heard a door slam and something shatter in the kitchen. He flinched at the sound and sat down on the front stoop. For years, he mostly ignored Dad's rants, which had become much worse since Warren was arrested. But this time was different. This time, Dad's words cut like a dagger in his heart.

Tyray knew his father was right.